

PAST PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATIONS.

BY JAMES PARTON.

The American press is becoming as remarkable for its ungovernable recklessness as it was formerly supposed to be for its docility as it was formerly supposed to be for its ungovernable recklessness.

Admitting the wisdom of this policy, we follow the example of our brethren of the press, not doubting that the American people will in the future, as they have in the past, select for their Chief Magistrate the individual who, all things considered, will be the best man for the time.

It may be interesting at this stage of our affairs, when parties are about to select men to represent them in the coming campaign, to cast a glance at previous Presidential elections, and not the various processes by which, among the mass of American citizens, a suitable Chief Magistrate has been found.

So far as we know, but one man has ever governed a nation who was the spontaneous and unanimous choice of his inhabitants.

During General Washington's first term, the two parties were formed, and the various names, having since contended for the supremacy. Each of these parties consisted at first of one man.

Those who sided with Jefferson were called Republicans, and those who sympathized with Hamilton were called Federalists.

The first contest between these parties occurred in 1793, when for the second time a President and Vice-President were to be chosen.

At the first election in 1788, John Adams had received thirty-four electoral votes out of sixty-seven for the Vice-Presidency, and the rest were divided among ten other candidates.

A caucus of members of Congress, then, was the first method hit upon for the selection of candidates. It is difficult to conceive of any other plan suited to the state of things at that time.

The Congressional caucuses were held with closed doors, and no part of their proceedings was communicated to the public except the result. It is obvious that such a mode of nomination was open to objections, since it gave opportunity for personal intrigue and solicitation, and it rendered a President who desired re-election, and a Cabinet minister ambitious of the succession, subservient to those members of Congress who were in a position to derive the nomination of candidates, and whose nomination was frequently equivalent to an election.

In 1796, when it was known that General Washington would retire at the expiration of his second term, there was no man in the Federal party of such commanding prominence as to be its natural and spontaneous choice.

The Federalist who was most active, and who possessed most of personal force and influence, was Alexander Hamilton; and it is somewhat remarkable that so shining a light in the Federal party should never have been thought of for the Presidency. It is true, he was not a native of the United States; but a special clause of the Constitution had provided for such cases as his, by making foreign-born citizens eligible to the Presidency who had been citizens at the adoption of the Constitution.

The Federal members of Congress in 1796 recommended to their fellow-citizens John Adams for the Presidency, and Thomas Pinckney for the Vice-Presidency. The Republican members nominated Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. Here we see at once both the excellence and the perils of this mode of nomination.

Thomas Jefferson—the author of the Declaration of Independence, the conspicuous champion of France, and the defender of the French Revolution, and the first Democrat of his age—was peculiarly entitled to the suffrages of the party himself had created. Pinckney, too, as a member of an important and wealthy Southern family, of dignified demeanor and respectable talents, could not have been considered out of place in the chair of the Senate.

Candidates in those simple old days were usually named, and if they were not so, it was felt to be dishonorable. The letters, diaries, and private memoranda of Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and John Quincy Adams, convince us that neither of those gentlemen wrote a line, or uttered a word, designed or calculated to promote their own elevation or to prevent that of another.

It was very far indeed from being a great man. The spirit of command was not in him, nor had he the tact which frequently supplies its place. He aspired to the highest honors of the State, and he saw, not without regretting, that the preference of Mr. Jefferson for his rival was likely to defer the gratification of his wishes.

Of all the men elected by universal suffrage to the chief magistracy of a nation, the one that was least likely to be spontaneously elected was James Madison. In personal appearance and demeanor, dressed as he was always in a suit of black, he was more like a student than a man of the world.

He was a man of the closet, far more able to form a correct opinion respecting government, than to administer it, and in times of difficulty a relative of Jefferson, who was much with him in his old age, has informed us that Thomas Jefferson respected more highly the understanding of James Madison, and deferred to it more, than to that of any other man of his time.

When the war closed in a blaze of triumph at New Orleans, in 1815, the Federal party was a thing of the past. It may be laid down as a rule, that a political party which gives a doubtful support to the administration during a war in which the honor and safety of the country are at stake, and from which the nation issues triumphant, will never regain power under its old name and organization.

Another law of politics may be laid down: whenever a political party has practically extinguished the party in opposition to it, it will speedily divide. Even if there did not exist a necessity for this in human nature, it would occur sooner or later from the ambition of rival chiefs.

James Monroe had been a man of commanding character, or even a thorough-going partisan, it would have been easy for him to continue the Jeffersonian dynasty by choosing his successor. But he was neither. So moderate had he become, that he was disposed to give one of the places in his Cabinet to a Federalist.

The leading competitors were six in number, and each of them possessed some signal advantage over the others. John Quincy Adams, as Secretary of State, was in the line of succession which the usage of twenty-four years had established. William H. Crawford, by withdrawing his name from the caucus of 1816 in favor of Mr. Monroe, had acquired a kind of right, which was acknowledged, to a nomination by the caucus of 1824; and he was indeed regarded as the rightful candidate of the party.

As Mr. Crawford was the predestinated candidate of the Congressional caucus, neither of his rivals could hope for the prize unless the caucus system were abolished. Accordingly, such a clamor was fomented in the country against "King Caucus," that the prestige of the Congressional caucus, which was in vogue at that time, was destroyed.

It was in vain that the party managers admitted the public to witness the deliberations of the caucus. On the evening appointed for its meeting, while the galleries of the House of Representatives were crowded with spectators, there were but sixty-six members of Congress upon the floor, who nominated Crawford, amid the derision of the country, and without increasing his strength in any section of it.

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General Jackson, as every one knows, brought into the Presidential chair the passions which five years of political strife had generated and inflamed, and the two darling objects of his policy were to keep Henry Clay out of and bring Martin Van Buren into the Presidency. Scarcely one important act of his administration was performed which had not some bearing upon one or the other of these objects.

General Jackson was not a man to let a slip of writing paper interfere with an obstacle to the execution of his will, and means were readily found of removing Mr. Van Buren from the list of the excluded.

On General Jackson's inauguration day, his most intimate friends could not have foretold who would finally stand highest in his regard, Vice-President Calhoun or Mr. Van Buren. The events which led to the President's speedy and total estrangement from Mr. Calhoun, and which induced him to dedicate himself, as it were, to the elevation of Mr. Van Buren, are too well known to be related here.

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King Caucus was thus dethroned without leaving a heir to succeed him, and, for the next eight years, there was no settled and recognized plan of nominating candidates. Andrew Jackson, first recommended to the people by the Legislature of Tennessee, endorsed by State Conventions and public meetings, was a name of magic with the people, and required little artificial aid.

For the election of 1828, no preliminary caucus and no other system of nomination was necessary. There could be but two candidates—the incumbent of the Presidential chair, and the popular soldier whose friends had industriously disseminated the falsehood, that he had been cheated out of the Presidency in 1825.

General Jackson was elected. He received one hundred and seventy-eight electoral votes, and Mr. Adams eighty-three. Thus, the powerful Republican party, triumphant and united since 1801, was divided, and the two divisions soon adopted new names. The party of which Andrew Jackson was the idolized chief was called Democratic, and that which looked up to Henry Clay as its head took the name of Whig.

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